

BOUND TO BE FREE: THE CASE OF POLLY STRONG*

(Although based on actual facts surrounding the case of *State v. Lasselle*, parts of this script may be the authors' fictional interpretation.)

Setting: **Outside the Capitol Building, Corydon, July, 1820**

(Audience: Scene card with date and picture of the building)

Polly: **I hope to soon be free! Please excuse my tears, but they are tears of worry! I hope that I will never be bound as a slave again! Inside this building, right now, Judges Blackford, Holman, and Scott are deciding whether I will be free or returned to bondage. Do you know who these men are?**

(Audience: Four (4) students identify the Indiana Supreme Court and give brief biographical sketches of the judges. Blackford: longest serving judge in Indiana Supreme Court history, served 35 years. Scott: one of the original three Indiana Supreme Court judges. Holman: moved from Kentucky and freed slaves inherited through his wife's family.)

Please forgive my manners! Let me introduce myself. I am Polly, although I was baptized Marguerite. Have you heard about me? I have heard that my story has been talked about throughout the whole of Indiana and even the Northwest Territory!

(Allow for responses)

Did you know that at one time Indiana was a part of the Northwest Territory?

Do you know what I mean by the Northwest Territory?

* Although written for use by students in grades 4-8, the classroom teacher easily can adapt this script to accommodate either older or younger students. For example, high school students could search for more biographical information about the key players or about the relocation of Indiana's capitol from Vincennes to Corydon.

Bound for Freedom: the Case of Polly Strong was written by Dr. Elizabeth R. Osborn, Special Assistant to the Chief Justice for Court History and Public Education, and Maxine Brown, Leora Brown School of Corydon, Indiana, as a part of the Courts in the Classroom program. More information is available on this topic at www.in.gov/judiciary/citc/special/bound-for-freedom/. Dr. Osborn can be reached at (317) 233-8682 or eosborn@courts.state.in.us

(Audience: Identify Northwest Territory, student holds up map.)

Did you know that slavery was illegal in the Northwest Territory and in Indiana Territory?

(Allow for responses)

Did you know that Indiana’s first constitution forbade slavery?

(Allow for responses)

Do you know when this constitution was written?

(Audience: Student responds, “1816”.)

Yes, I have in my memory some words from that Constitution. It says, “That all men are born equally free and independent; and have certain natural, inherent, and unalienable rights; among which are, the enjoying and defending of life and liberty, and of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; and pursuing, and obtaining happiness and safety.” And later on it says SLAVERY WAS ILLEGAL! So why, then was slavery tolerated in Indiana?

(Allow for responses)

But let me continue my story, so you can understand why I am here outside this courthouse waiting to see if I will be free. I was born 22 years ago in Vincennes, Indiana. Do you know where Vincennes is?

(Audience: Identifies Vincennes as the Territorial capital after division of the Northwest Territory. Hold up picture.)

My mother’s name is Jenny. She is standing right over there.

(Audience: Points to audience member who stands up and waves/smiles – sign says “Polly’s mom”.)

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She was kidnapped in Kentucky by some Indians who eventually sold her to a Frenchman named Lasselle – Antoine Lasselle.

(Audience: Student holds up map of Indiana and Kentucky outline.)

Now don't be confused. This is my current master's uncle. I suppose you have heard about this practice which put women like my mother and me at risk—stealing people and selling them as slaves. Mother Jenny had no choice in the matter – she was merely a slave and considered property.

My mother had two children. I have a brother named James. See, that's James over there next to my mother.

(Audience: Student stands up and waves/smiles – sign says, “Polly's brother”.)

Captain David Strong from Fort Wayne is thought to be our father. Our mother was not married to Captain Strong, but in my baptismal record he is named as my father. I was given his last name, so I am Polly Strong. Hyacinthe Lasselle was already one of the most prominent men in Vincennes when he bought my mother, James, and me. Lasselle owned a tavern, which served as the only hotel in Vincennes. That's him over there.

(Audience: points to audience member who stands up and scowls – sign says “Hyacinthe Lasselle”.)

My mother works in Mrs. Lasselle's home – James and I worked in the tavern or at home. We weren't forced to work in the fields like I've heard slaves in the South are forced to do. However, we still have no freedom to choose what we

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wanted to do. Our time was planned for us and we have very little free time. James and I wanted to learn to read and we were lucky because a kind man we met in the tavern helped to teach us. Do you know that in many places down south it is illegal to teach a slave to read! My mother taught me to sew and to make knots. Of course, we were allowed to go to church. As I stated earlier, I was baptized as Marguerite on April 11, 1819, at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Vincennes. There I was taught to pray and pray I do! Each day and each night I pray for freedom. I pray that my mother and my brother, James, will be set free from bondage. Can you imagine what life would be like if you could not choose for yourself what kind of work you would like to do and whether you might wish to marry and to whom? What do you think – how would you feel if you could not choose for yourself?

(Allow for responses)

Being a slave, being someone's property, makes me feel very sad and helpless! But my sadness turned to hope when Mr. Osborn and Mr. Kinney moved to Knox County. They are brothers-in-law and have strong anti-slavery views, they even published a newspaper with articles opposing slavery. They are convinced that the slavery like mine is illegal in Indiana. Do you know why they think that slavery is illegal in Indiana?

(Audience: Because the Indiana Constitution of 1816 said so.)

Exactly. So, they convinced Colonel George McDonald and Moses Tabbs, who also live in the area, to bring a case in the local courts for my freedom. You see,

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I was told one of the arguments that Hyacinthe Lasselle would use was that the privilege of holding slaves existed when this land belonged to the French and then to Virginia before it even became a part of the Northwest Territory or the free state of Indiana. Both Virginia and France allowed slavery. Do you think that after Indiana became a state, its citizens should still be allowed to own slaves if the Constitution says slavery is illegal?

(Allow for responses)

That's right . . . right there in Article 11, section 7 of the Indiana Constitution it says "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in this state otherwise than for the punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." These words are so important to me that I've memorized them! Do you know some of the words of the Constitution from memory?

(Allow for responses)

Are you surprised that a slave knows about the law? Well, Mr. Moses Tabbs helped me to understand this important document. Can you understand why I remember these words and keep them close to my heart?

(Allow for responses)

I was born into slavery. My mother, Jenny, was not free to choose for herself or for James and me. I have lived as a slave for twenty-two years. I hope after today all that will change. I hope I will be able to make my own decisions and I can help my dear mother, Jenny.

Perhaps, James, our mother, and I will move to another place to live. It

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may be difficult to live in Vincennes where Mr. Lasselle lives and where the courts of Knox County kept telling him he could keep me as a slave. I'm not the only slave or indentured servant living in Vincennes. I wonder what will happen to them if I'm set free? I wonder if people are still being held as slaves in other parts of Indiana? What do you think? Surely, there are none here in this lovely village, Corydon, are there?

(Allow for responses)

I have heard about many black families who came to Indiana hoping to be free. Although they came to be free, I'm afraid that some may not have found freedom. However, if I am freed by this case, I hope they too will be free. Slavery will be outlawed once and for all time by the highest court in the State! Oh look, there's my lawyer, Mr. Kinney. I think he wants me to come inside.

(Audience: Student comes around the corner and waves Polly over.)

(She then joins him standing behind one of the tables.)

(Audience: Scene Card, Indiana Supreme Court courtroom, Corydon, Indiana.)

(Audience: Student as Hyacinthe Lasselle moves up and stands at the other table.)

(Audience: Student acting as Bailiff – calls for all to rise.)

Bailiff: All rise, the Supreme Court of Indiana is now in session.

(Three students enter and are seated at the bench.)

Judge Scott: Please be seated.

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Judge Blackford: We are gathered here today to hand down our opinion in the case between
Hyacinthe Lasselle and Miss Polly Strong. Are both parties present?

Lasselle: Yes, your honor.

Polly: Yes, your Honor.

Judge Holman: (reading an excerpt with the key point of the opinion.) **“It follows as an irresistible conclusion, that, under our present form of government, Slavery can have no existence in the State of Indiana, and of course the claim of Said Hyacinth Lasselle cannot be supported. It is therefore considered by the court now here, that the judgment of the Said Circuit Court be in all things reversed, set aside, and held for naught; And that the said Polly be discharged from the custody.”**

(Audience: Lasselle scowls, and stomps away.)

Polly: (Celebrates, hugs attorney, hugs audience members, family, etc.)

(Creates her own closing statement about how wonderful it is to be free.)

Polly: Excuse me now, I want to go share the good news with my friends back in
Vincennes.

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